

Looking at the Role of Dispositions in Teacher Education

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## Introduction

I want to thank Mark Campbell and his planning Committee for inviting me to address the topic of “dispositions in teacher education” at this meeting of music educators. When I was a professor at the University of Illinois, I learned a great deal about music education from two giants in the field – Charlie Leonard and Dick Colwell. On more than several occasions they invited me to work with their students in groups or on dissertation committees – and on each occasion I learned a great deal from them and from their students about instruction, curriculum, and research.

## Dispositions in the news

“Dispositions in teacher education” is surely a timely topic. At the AACTE meetings in San Diego earlier this year, there were 24 sessions devoted to the topic. At the current AERA meeting, there must be an equal number. Of interest to note, in neither program was “dispositions” a guide word in the index. Further, there have been numerous op-ed pieces hostile to the notion of dispositions in general and more specifically to the idea that teacher educators take dispositions into account in either admitting candidates into programs or assessing their progress in the program. Most of the commentaries focus on extreme cases that seem to suggest that teacher educators who are implementing assessments of dispositions are out of the main stream of current thought regarding academic freedom, the First Amendment of the Constitution, and/or common sense. I intend to speak to what constitutes the mainstream of thought regarding

dispositions by rehearsing the history of dispositions in teacher education as I understand it, by comparing various definitions of dispositions extant in the teacher education literature, by describing some approaches to implementing dispositions in a teacher education program including the measurement of dispositions, and finally identifying some problems associated with teaching dispositions and assessing the dispositions of candidates.

Early history of dispositions in teacher education.

While the term “dispositions” is a common one, found in most dictionaries persons, most notably Professor Larry Freeman of Governor’s State University, looked hard for the origins of the concept “disposition” as it applies to teaching and teacher education. Perhaps the first use of the term in this context was found in the seminal book, Philosophy of Education: Learning and Schooling, authored by Donald Arnstine of the University of Wisconsin. He made “dispositions” the centerpiece of his work, advocating that teaching dispositions is perhaps the most important thing schools and teachers can do.

The notion of dispositions as program goals was probably first brought to the consciousness of teacher educators by the work of Lilian Katz of the University of Illinois. For a brief period of time, Lilian Katz deflected her principal attention away from Early Childhood Education to concentrate on research in teacher education. She authored a number of important papers in the field – having to do with the dilemmas

faced by program planners in teacher education, to the problem of carrying out follow-up studies, and perhaps most importantly, to dispositions.

Lilian Katz had the insight that some of our candidates have skills, but not the dispositions to use them. For example, in most teacher education programs candidates are taught the skills to plan lessons, but as most teacher educators know, those particular skills are rarely practiced by experienced teachers. Lilian hypothesized that often the ways that skills are taught actually weaken the disposition to use them. An example that comes to mind is reading. There is a danger that some of the reading programs that advance particular skills of reading – narrow skills and sequential skills – actually weaken the disposition to read. People learn how to read, but they don't.

Lilian Katz' thoughtful piece was published in 1985. A short time after the publication of this article, Professor Bob Ennis postulated dispositions that are associated with critical thinking.

Lilian Katz wrote eloquently about innovative ideas as having a conceptual size – some were too large (such as critical thinking) and some too small (wait time). She characterized this problem as the Goldilocks phenomenon. Ideas of an optimum size are likely to capture the imagination of the profession. Evidently, the idea of dispositions was of the right size.

In 1989, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics announced its standards of mathematics curriculum and teaching. The Council included along with

several obligatory categories of knowledge in mathematics, a grouping called dispositions.

#### Modern history of dispositions

A concentrated effort to reform teacher education was undertaken by Linda Darling-Hammond under the flag of INTASC (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium). Working at state levels, Darling-Hammond enunciated principles that defined excellent teachers and lobbied to have the principles adopted by State standards boards. Her initiatives were quite successful in this regard. The INTASC principles included the notion disposition – in an attempt to prevent teacher candidates getting a license simply because of their A academic averages when some of the A students treat pupils cruelly.

Not long after that, NCATE decided that dispositions should be added to the list of “what teachers should know and know how to do.” During the comment period, when proposed NCATE standards were reviewed by the field, a number of persons wrote to NCATE asking for some patience in adopting the expectation that teacher educators measure dispositions. If there were examples where dispositions were scaled, where the psychometrics of such scales had been studied, then all right. But without such studies, NCATE was urged to omit dispositions from its litany of expectations.

As often happens when accrediting bodies write standards that no one can meet, the standards are judged “met” by visiting teams, fostering cynicism and resentment in

those who have invested heavily in the accreditation process. One such person was the late Larry Freeman, Dean-emeritus of Governors State University in Illinois. He wrote to me to ask how “dispositions” as a requirement became so prominent in the field when there was no evidence to support its conceptual integrity or its usefulness. His question prompted some amusement on my part, because Larry Freeman had earlier in his career been an important administrator in the Illinois State Department of Public Instruction. In his role there, he had threatened to shut down 28 of the 35 teacher education programs at the University of Illinois because they had not required early field experiences “throughout the period of preparation.” I asked him then, and recently when he called, for the evidence to support early field experiences as an important aspect of teacher education. As many of you know, there is no hard evidence that early field experiences, in spite of their heavy costs, benefit candidates in any substantial way. Most studies favoring early field experience show that candidates with early field experiences are “more comfortable” in student teaching for the first week or so – but after that the “comfort advantage” fades. So, I was suggesting that early field experience was an idea of optimum size, much as “dispositions” is of optimum size – and our colleagues participating in writing accreditation standards are wont to adopt ideas as standards regardless of evidence. They just make sense.

Prompting teacher educators to take on “candidate dispositions” as a goal comes with some costs. When I went to the University of Vermont in 1987, I was amazed at the statement of the goals of the College of Education there. The first several were not unusual – having to do with preparing excellent teachers and providing the teaching field in Vermont with reliable knowledge about good practice. But somewhere down the list, the list of goals included, “End world hunger.” When I inquired about this goal, and what the faculty was doing to achieve it, I was told that this was a holdover from the 1960’s. People thought ending world hunger was a good idea, so why not include it in the litany. I think something like that has happened with the notion of dispositions. Originally, the idea of dispositions was tightly linked to skills, particularly teaching skills visible in the classroom. For example, we might teach our candidates how to write effective tests and how to perform item analyses to identify weak items. They learn the skills, but must also have the dispositions to apply them.

But recently, teacher educators who may be called “do-gooders” without disrespect add to the goals of teacher education to “advocate for social justice.” Here is where the problem begins. I am not sure what counts as “social justice,” and I imagine that faculty and students could disagree about the term. For example, I am sure those who voted for welfare reform in the Clinton years thought they were doing so in the name of social justice, while others feared that a broken safety net in our society would lead to injustices. How may candidates be evaluated in the for dispositions in the area of “social justice” without causing all sorts of problems with the First Amendment and with our sense of academic freedom for faculty as well as students? In my judgment, they can’t!

## Definitions of disposition

The field of teacher education, perhaps more than most, is known for widely differing definitions of key concepts. The example of “reflection” comes to mind. Everyone seems to be graduating teachers who are reflective practitioners, but it is difficult to recognize consensus in the literature about what counts as reflection and what constitutes better reflections as opposed to weak reflections. It is no surprise that the same is true of the concept, “dispositions.”

In the original Katz article on dispositions as goals, the notion of disposition was defined as an attributed characteristic of a teacher, one that summarizes the trend of a teacher’s actions in particular contexts. (p. 301). This definition builds on the work of Buss and Craik (1983) who defined dispositions as “summaries of act frequencies.”

This definition does not see “dispositions” as causes of behavior. A teacher, according to Katz, does not praise students because he has a disposition to be supportive. Rather, a teacher who is observed to make use of praise in a number of contexts and on frequent occasions might be described as having a supportive disposition. In this sense, the concept, “disposition” is descriptive and may have a predictive element. Someone who is supportive over time, is likely to be supportive “next time.”

Associated with his identification of critical thinking dispositions, Robert Ennis defined dispositions as follows: a disposition is a tendency to do something, given certain conditions.

While INTASC did not formally define “disposition,” one might infer a definition from the examples it advanced. INTASC links sets of dispositions with each of its ten basic principles. The “root words” associated with disposition include the following: the teacher realizes, appreciates, has enthusiasm for, believes, respects, is sensitive, values, and recognizes. As is clear, this idea of “disposition” represents not a summary of behaviors, but beliefs, values, and other traits.

Next, consider the NCATE definition of disposition, the one that is causing so many problems for people engaged in the accreditation process.

The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator’s own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include the belief that all students learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment.

As in the case with INTASC, the NCATE definition posits that something “inside the brain, guides teachers’ behaviors – including beliefs and attitudes, and so on. The collection of “things” constitutes a disposition.

In 2001, the National Research Council’s Mathematics Learning Study Committee issued a report entitled, “Adding It Up.” The authors advocated that schools and teachers work to develop “mathematical proficiency” in their students. Mathematical proficiency was defined as having five strands – one of which was a “productive disposition.” This goal was defined as “habitual inclination to see mathematics as sensible, useful, and worthwhile, coupled with the belief in diligence and one’s own efficacy” (p. 5).

In an important statement about dispositions published by AACTE, Hugh Sockett sees dispositions as “The professional virtues, qualities, and habits of mind and behavior held and developed by teachers on the basis of their knowledge, understanding, and commitments to students, families, their colleagues and communities.” (page 23). He sees dispositions as “professional qualities of character” including courage, sincerity, and trustworthiness.

In the same publication, Mary Dietz illustrates what she sees as three important dispositions – using the term “willingness” to define two of them. (The third is simply, “respect for others.”) For example, the willingness to do what it takes to help students learn.”

My good friend at Delaware, Frank Murray, is president of TEAC. At a time when NCATE has been attacked in op-ed pieces for its stand on dispositions, Murray

wrote to TEAC members the following in response to a question addressed to TEAC by a group of teacher educators perhaps in an attempt to distance TEAC from NCATE's problems.

**Question: Under Quality Principle I: Evidence of student learning, is the term "caring teaching skill" an equivalent term to dispositions?**

*Murray: Yes, it is equivalent and covers the same ground. However, it is the behavior that flows from the disposition that is assessed, not the disposition itself.*

What we see in this authoritative array of definitions is the concept, disposition, portrayed as a “cause” of behavior – akin to traits or character or will that evidently must be shaped and changed if teachers are to “behave correctly” in the classroom. Further, when dispositions are seen as values, beliefs, or character traits, it is easy to see how “do-gooders” in our field would jump at the chance to use mandated attention to dispositions as an opportunity raise issues of social justice, racism, peace, and yes, world hunger into the equation. It is a conceptual mess.

Approaches to dispositions in teacher education

There seems to be two important steps to be taken in addressing the NCATE expectation that teacher education units meet the following standard: “Candidates for all professional education roles develop and model dispositions that are expected of educators.” The first is to select the dispositions that a programs wishes to strengthen

and the second is to find ways to assess the strength of dispositions. Both steps are exceedingly difficult and in my judgment not fully understood. I will address each step briefly.

Selecting the dispositions. During the competency based movement in teacher education, sponsored in part by the US Office of Education and advocated by AACTE, teacher education programs would write out the competencies they were fostering in their candidates. The lists were formidable and long. Michigan State University, for example, had as many as 1500 competencies in its list of goals. Katz was optimistic that listing dispositions as goals would avoid that problem because of its conceptual size. In the original article, it was suggested that once a teacher education faculty adopted a “conceptual frame” for its programs – thus delimiting its focus, choosing a smaller list of aligned dispositions would follow. We are not so confident now – 20 years later. However, the faculty at the University of Delaware approved a set of scholarly dispositions for our doctoral program. These dispositions included the following:

1. To prize the doubt. (To be less sure about what we think we know.)
  
2. To struggle to understand the ideas of others. (This disposition requires deferring judgment or evaluation until a position is well understood.)

3. To qualify claims cogently. (To indicate the limits of knowledge and to convey the degree of confidence we have in our judgments or assertions.)
  
4. To seek multiple explanations. (Associated with this disposition is the idea that not all explanations are equally credible; some are more credible than others.)
  
5. To wonder. (To be curious about the issues we face, sometimes by making an effort to make the familiar seem strange.)
  
6. To "look it up." (To pursue knowledge, outside of course frameworks, to find out what is written about topics relevant to advanced study.)
  
7. To ask "how do you know?" (To probe for sources of evidence; how people know is almost as important in assessing their knowledge as the knowledge itself.)
  
8. To persist. (Intellectual problems are almost always difficult, complex, and often do not yield to standard and conventional approaches. We need to demonstrate the stamina to stay with them, to hold the course, to resist the temptation to quit quickly and prematurely.)

9. To seek and accept criticism. {We need to understand that what we don't know is massive, and what we do know is fragile and limited. In our inquiry, we need to seek help, accept criticism in good spirit, and "demonstrate intellectual humility in working with ideas.)

It is important to note that dispositions imply certain contexts in which the dispositions are to be observed. Further, the dispositions are general in that they don't spell out the associated behaviors, but from observations of how doctoral students respond, attributions linking the behaviors to the dispositional statements are made. This set seems sufficiently parsimonious to our faculty and worthy to adopt. It was widely recognized that the list is incomplete and partial – and that other dispositions that might be associated with “being scholarly” are missing.

The resignation to “incompleteness” is apparently an important attribute of selecting dispositions as goals.

Assessing dispositions. Bus and Craik (1983) suggested ways of assessing dispositions, after a target is selected. There are several steps in the process.

1. After identifying the target disposition, let us take “qualifying claims” from our list of scholarly dispositions for an example, a panel of scholars is asked to generate examples of teacher acts that would exemplify this disposition. In Bus and Craik's example, perhaps 100 examples might be generated by a panel of a dozen people.

2. Next, a second panel would be asked to rate how typical each of the 100 examples would be of the disposition. The instruction to the second panel is of interest here. Panelists are asked to assume that while there are 100 various shades of red, for instance, consider a box of crayons, some reds are more “red” than other “reds.” In an analogous case, some acts are more representative of the disposition, “qualifying claims,” than others. The results of the second panel winnow down the 100 examples to a few – say 10 examples.

3. Next, supervisors are asked observe a student teacher over a period of time, marking the instances in which one of the target acts was observed. The assumption is that a student teacher who is seen as more frequently “acting” in line with the exemplars of “qualifying claims,” has a stronger disposition than another student teacher with less frequent “acts” linked to his teaching.

We have tried a number of ways to assess dispositions that are perhaps less labor intensive and less time sensitive. For example, we have had supervisors rate student teachers on Likert scales where the “dispositions” and not the acts are posed for ratings. We have tried ipsative measures – asking supervisors to rate the two strongest and the two weakest dispositions from a list of dispositions.

None of our approaches have been satisfactory – essentially because of low coefficients of agreement among raters. It seems that we haven't been able to successfully teach raters what is meant by a specific disposition.

## Problems

In a way of summary, let me cite what I see as the enduring problems associated with using dispositions in teacher education as a basis of assessing candidates.

1. We need to select a finite set of dispositions with which to work. Given the notion that we want to graduate “complete” teachers after four years of study, it is difficult to take on some and not others.

2. We can, with some effort as described above, judge that some candidates have stronger dispositions than other candidates, but we cannot determine a cut score that asserts that if a disposition is as weak as X, the candidate should not be licensed.

3. We need to consider how dispositions are taught and strengthened. Bandura's research on “observational learning” may be of help to us – but that is not at all clear.

What are some methods we can use to teach dispositions?

Commission on Reading. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.

Ennis, R. (1985). Goals for a critical thinking curriculum. In A. L. Costa (Ed).  
Developing minds, pp 54-57. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

### Lilian Katz Definition

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as an attributed characteristic of a teacher, one that summarizes the trend of a teacher's

actions in particular contexts. (p. 301).

## Dispositions Linked to Critical Thinking

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## NCATE Definition

The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include the belief that all students learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment.

Definition of the National Research Council's Mathematics  
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This goal was defined as “habitual inclination to see mathematics as sensible, useful, and worthwhile, coupled with the belief in diligence and one’s own efficacy” (p. 5).

## TEAC's Response to the Disposition Controversy

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